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Shenoa Lawrence  
*California State University, Monterey Bay*

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# Cultures of Class Stratification

By Shenoa Lawrence

## Summary

*This article explores the systematic removal of the cultural affectations of the upper class stratifications that Cambodians experienced in the 1970s. Cambodia underwent drastic political changes forced by Khmer Rouge, a totalitarian government that seized the power in the 1950s. The author compares her personal insights on class in America against the perceptions of a Cambodian girl during the era of the Khmer Rouge.*

## Introduction

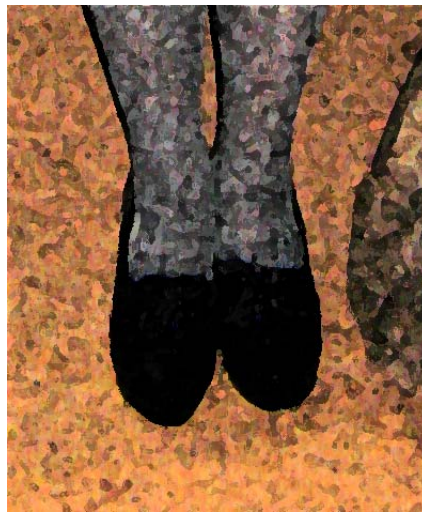
Until I left my hometown for the first time, I had very little concept of other classes. Growing up in a rather homogeneous rural California gave little opportunity for me to experience diversity; so much of my sphere of influence was small and limited to the classes produced by the rural way of living. I received my only knowledge of other classes from media influences in the form of television and movies. As were most of my peers, I was envious of the fabulous lives lived by Hollywood stars. In my eyes, there were two classes: mine and theirs, and I was at the bottom end of that (class was something that had a top and a bottom). Everything I wanted for my future matched the culture I saw on prime-time television.

In an online published article, "Antonio Gramsci on Culture," Raquel de Almeida Moraes described how, "The bourgeoisie uses its political, moral and intellectual leadership to impose its vision of the world as something

comprehensible and universal, which in this way molds the interests and needs of the subordinate groups" (Moraes 2003). I can certainly say that my interests and needs were molded, and it wasn't until I left my home and traveled that I could begin to see more than two American classes with myself at the bottom. I have come to understand that I wasn't at the bottom by any means, and that American classes cannot be separated from the other classes in other countries. No man is an island, indeed.

I struggled to read, "The Stones Cry Out," by Molyda Szymusiak. This autobiography detailed her experiences as a child in Cambodia under a totalitarian regime. Although most of the book related her struggles

after the Khmer Rouge takeover, some of the dialog discussed what expectations she had of her life as an upper class government official's daughter. My struggles had to do with the strong emotions I felt as a result of the story as well as the difficulties I encountered trying to relate to Molyda's experiences.



## Commonalities

Molyda's life in Phnom Penh did have something in common with my own life, I've discovered. As children, we both had expectations of a future of education and a certain amount of comforts common to industrial societies. "We were familiar with the palace, since Father worked near it, in the official government buildings ... At home; the adults spoke French among themselves, a language I didn't understand yet. I had been about to start school at the Lycée Descartes, where I would have learned French" (Szymusiak 1999, 7). Even though Phnom Penh is an urban city in a primarily agrarian society, and my hometown of Lakeport is far from urban centers, I think our childhood selves viewed the future from a perspective of comfortable semi-industrialization. We were both consumers (she of bread and I of pop tarts). Our positions within society existed due to the labors of the producers.

## Dâ's Experience with the Khmer Rouge

As I continued reading "The Stones Cry Out," I noticed that I had developed a perception of two personas of Cambodian culture. Even though these two women were the same person, I felt it was important to make a distinction between the two personas. Dâ was the young daughter of a bourgeois family forced by the Khmer Rouge to work as peasants under terrible conditions. Molyda Szymusiak was a Cambodian refugee and escaped the killing fields to live with an adoptive family in France. For the purposes of this discussion, I'll continue by using the name Dâ, as her experiences under that name are the most relevant to this discussion. To some extent, Molyda might even consider Dâ to be another person. Using this name has been useful to me in that I can attempt to understand Dâ's con-

cept of the future without knowledge of her eventual escape into refugee status.

Dâ was the daughter of an urban upper class family in Phnom Penh. When the Khmer Rouge invaded, the entire city was emptied of all residents. This exodus was the first step in an effort to eradicate class stratification by demoting the bourgeois to peasanthood. To some extent, the efforts of the Khmer Rouge were successful as experienced by Dâ. The future she expected as the daughter of an upper class Cambodian citizen was taken from her. That future was shattered when the Khmer Rouge evacuated Phnom Penh, and Dâ's family fled to the countryside and learned to live and work as peasants.

## Gaining an Understanding of Systematic Removal of Class Affectations

To gain an understanding of the aims of the Angkar, I reviewed "Cambodia 1977: Gone to Pot." In this article, Jackson relates the Angkar's position on the systematic removal of the cultural affectations of the upper class: "The regime voices concern for rooting out the last vestiges of class heritage, and the general lifestyle and language of urban Cambodia has ceased to be a societal ideal, being replaced by the more simple manners and forms of speech of the countryside." (1978, 78). In order to make a lasting change in social class structure, it was necessary to break down the ties of family. It's my belief that class status is learned primarily through early indoctrination of family influences. The power of the bourgeois class could be broken by attacking the families themselves. The Khmer Rouge aimed to incite social change through revolutionary methods. The suppression of the bourgeois class and the rise of the peasants into positions of power produced not only a lasting social change, but a strong cultural change as well as the former bourgeois class disappeared along with the educated members of society.

The class position of Dâ's family during their time in Phnom Penh seems to be derived from her father's position as a government official. If her mother held any work positions, it was not mentioned; therefore I'll operate on the assumption that the family's status was derived from her father's status. As a government official, he would be automatically sought out by the Khmer Rouge as a possible source of opposition. Even though his specific role was not known by the insurgents, it was clear that he was not a peasant due to his mannerisms and lack of knowledge in farming and building techniques. The kind Khmer Rouge who had brought the family out of Phnom Penh warned them, "Never say that you are of bourgeois origins or that you have had any trade other than a manual one. All such people will be liquidated" (Szymusiak 1999, 55).

Jackson indicates that "...[d]uring 1977, private households were abolished for the purposes of eating and raising produce to enrich individual diets; since the beginning of the year, all meals have been taken in communal kitchens, thus chipping away at the last bastion of inequality and privatism, the nutrient family" (Jackson 1978, 84). He quotes Pol Pot, "Each of these cooperatives constitutes a small collective society, which is a brand new community where all kinds of depraved cultural and social blemishes have been wiped out" (Jackson 1978, 84-85).

The Khmer Rouge identified the social structures which contributed to class stratification and sought to eliminate them. The family, specifically the upper class family, was a threat. Dâ's family experienced this when a woman came to her family's hut and demanded that all food and cooking utensils be given to the community. Dâ reflected how the Mekong (former peasants) did not have to abide by these rules of community ownership (Szymusiak 1999, 89).

## Family Status Comparison

I'd like to take a moment to discuss what family status is and how it's measured in this discussion. Dâ's cultural identity stemmed from her family's status in Phnom Penh, and much of that status seemed to be derived from her father's position as a government employee. Sorensen states that "If families have only one person in gainful employment, this person's work situation probably is a reasonably good indicator of the family's lifestyle and standard of living and of the family members' interests and life chance" (Sorensen 1994, 31). Since both my father and Dâ's father seem to be the sole person of gainful employment, I will use the conventional method of class stratification as the basis for measuring our respective family's class status. This measurement clarifies the similarities between Dâ's class and my own. Not so very long ago in America, a common question was, "what does your father do for a living?" This question reflects the patriarchal nature of our societies, and as individuals our identity is frequently tied in with the status of our fathers. Asking that question about a father's employment would make a statement about the worth of the child.

My family has a history of blue collar work in the US. Somewhat typical of the type, we are generally not educated beyond high school level and the majority of the family lives month to month. However, we are generally able to make ends meet and survive without relying heavily on government assistance. We benefited from the position of our country as a world superpower in trade and economics. Wal-Mart toys cost little, and Vietnamese sweaters only a little more. Like many Americans, my family has been mostly unaware of the great number of countries which provide the building blocks of our quality of life. The cheap electronics and clothing we own were manufactured in other countries by nameless individuals who "probably" make less of an income that we do. As long as we

were not brought face to face with the details behind the products, it was business as usual and the damage to the producing countries went unseen.

### **Lack of Awareness by Those Who Consume**

This lack of awareness by those who consume of those who produce is the greatest similarity I can see between the families of both Dâ and myself. Like my own life, she entered into adolescence expecting to go to school, enjoy her friends and family, and grow up in an industrialized urban lifestyle. This lifestyle is supported by another group of people who live in conditions of hunger and poverty. The peasants of Cambodia produced the main staple crop which fueled the country's economy: rice. Without the production of rice and the economic benefits it had, the upper class would not have been able to lead the urban lifestyle that Dâ's family enjoyed. The consumers benefited from the class stratification which denied the producers an education and hope for the future. They also paid for it, "Khmer Rouge soldiers had been recruited from the poorest population strata of the village. The latent anger of these previously downtrodden worker-peasants toward more privileged Cambodians was exploited by Khmer Rouge leaders for the purpose of radically altering Cambodia's social structure" (Clayton 1998, 2).

Given the negative attitudes towards Americans, it's not out of the realm of possibility that similar upheavals in social structure could throw my own culture into disarray. As a country, America has been the consumer, with a myriad of other countries around the world placed in the role of producers. I believe that our country has benefited from this relationship of producer/consumer while other countries suffered societal consequences which placed large portions of their citizens in poverty and sometimes violent situations. If

Americans were faced with producing countries in violent revolution which disrupted the lines of production, our consumerist culture would implode.

I strongly identify with Denis Goulet's perspective written in the article, "In Defense of Cultural Rights: Technology, Tradition and Conflicting Models of Rationality." He describes cultural rights as a human right, to be prioritized as strongly as economic or political rights (Goulet 1981, 4). The cultural rights of those people in our world called producers are consistently placed into a backseat position behind all consumers. The strength and continued hegemony of economic institutions demands such an unequal relationship.

In an effort to "balance" the inequality, the Khmer people only managed to destroy their educated class, and the country today is suffering the price. Even though their efforts and methods went wrong, it doesn't mean there wasn't a problem that needed addressing. The class stratification that existed needed to be acknowledged. More specifically, the importance of the role of producers needed to be acknowledged. I believe that societies should properly recognize the importance of all classes and give them an equal representation.


### **Knowing is One Step Closer to Changing**

To some extent, it would be hypocritical of me to judge the Cambodian upper class in light of the role my own society has in the world stage. For many years, I was unaware of issues of class and it took years before I started to understand the reasons conducive to class conflict. Even though I don't profess myself to be knowledgeable enough to propose a definitive solution, I can offer a suggestion which would be a step in the right direction. Those of us who know about the problems created by class stratification have an obligation to participate in a dialog about it. As part of the upper class in a stratified society, we are at the top end of the power structure, and

our role can be to balance the inequities created by the system we benefit from. The alleviation of poverty, hunger, and illiteracy should be at the top of our list.

Even as a child Dâ seemed to understand her privileged position in society:

And yet, when I looked all those poor people pressing in on us from all sides, I was sad and ashamed. It was as if the crowd itself was carrying us along. I would almost have welcomed their envy, but they looked at us without expression, doubtless assuming we belonged to a new class of exploiters (Szymusiak 1999, 7).

This comment shows that she knew and wanted to change the culture of stratification that placed her at the top so that everyone in her country could have the same opportunities. I believe that *knowing* is one step closer to *changing*, and creating an open dialog about class stratification is a good step towards widening the circle of understanding. 

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